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ABSTRACT

Zora Neale Hurston's work is lively, lyrical, funny, and poignant, but this consummate literary craftsperson was also a first-rate ethnographer, conducting field work for Franz Boas and for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). "Their Eyes Were Watching God," often acclaimed as Hurston's masterpiece, is perhaps the richest beneficiary of her work as a folklorist: its evocation of "picking in the jook joint, playing the dozens, and petitioning root doctors" offers a compelling synthesis of ethnological reality and lively characterization and setting. This lesson plan for grades 9-12 focuses on the way Hurston incorporates, adapts, transforms, and comments on black folklife in "Their Eyes Were Watching God." The lesson plan offers an introduction; cites subject areas, time required, and skills developed; poses a guiding question; lists learning objectives; provides strategies to teach the lesson; suggests diverse classroom activities; presents additional activities to extend the lesson; lists selected Websites; and addresses standards alignment. Folklore terminology and sample worksheets are attached. (NKA)

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Folklore in Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God". EDSITEment Lesson Plan.

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Folklore in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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GRADES 9–12

Introduction

In the years since Alice Walker's famous "rediscovery" of Zora Neale Hurston, Hurston's work has received new and richly deserved attention from high school English teachers. Hurston's work is lively, lyrical, funny, and poignant, but this consummate literary craftsperson was also a first-rate ethnographer, conducting fieldwork for Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, and for the Works Progress Administration.

It is not surprising, then, that Hurston's fictional output sings (sometimes literally!) with the sounds, songs, and stories of the Southern black folk tradition. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, often acclaimed Hurston's masterpiece, is perhaps the richest beneficiary of her work as a folklorist: its evocation of picking in the jook joint, playing the dozens, and petitioning root doctors offers a compelling synthesis of ethnological reality and lively characterization and setting.

In tribute to Hurston's fusion of social science and the author's art, this lesson plan focuses on the way Hurston incorporates, adapts, transforms, and comments on black folklife in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Students will read the novel, explore Hurston's own life history and collection methods, listen to her WPA recordings of folksongs and folktales, and compare transcribed folk narrative texts with the plot and themes of *Their Eyes*. Along the way, the history of black autonomy in the post-Civil War South (especially the town of Eatonville, where Hurston grew up and which is the setting for much of the novel) is available for interdisciplinary connections or simply as a potent reminder of the vital relationship between place, tradition, history, and story. In short, the idea is to understand, both as formal analysts of voice and style and as historians of literature, the crucial role of oral folklore in Hurston's written canon.

Guiding Question:

What is the relationship between formal individual literary creativity and the informal, traditional aesthetic standards of the writer's own community?

Learning Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to do the following:

- Define folklore, folk groups, tradition, and oral narrative
- Identify traditional elements in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
- Analyze and understand the role of traditional folkways and folk speech in the overall literary impact of the novel
- Compare Zora Neale Hurston's work as a collector of folk narrative with her better-known status as a novelist
- Understand as both listeners and tellers the importance of voice,

Photograph of Zora Neale Hurston. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten collection. Courtesy of American Memory Collection.

Subject Areas

Art and Culture
- Anthropology
- Folklore

History and Social Studies
- U.S. History - African-American

Literature and Language Arts
- American
- Fiction

Time Required

Lesson One: Two class periods
Lesson Two: Three-four class periods
Lesson Three: Two class periods
Extending the Lesson: Long-term assignment, but in-class portion can be finished within a class period

Skills

Listening skills
Literary analysis and interpretation
Information gathering and research
Critical thinking

pacing, and other features of performance in oral narrative
- Transcribe orally given narrative into eye dialect.

Creative writing
Collaboration
Internet skills
Reading literary texts
Drawing inferences and comparisons
Performance

Additional Data

Date Created: 07/09/02

Preparing to Teach this Lesson

- Review the lesson and bookmark all material to be downloaded or copied. For several of the activities described below, you will need the handout, Folklore: Some Useful Terminology, available here as a downloadable pdf file. For two of the exercises (1.Folklore and Traditional Life and 2. Folk Song and Folk Narrative.), you will need to download the worksheet, Folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- In preparation for exercise 2, below, you may wish to review and download selections from Hurston transcriptions of folktales: available from the EDSITEment resource American Studies at the University of Virginia is the etext of her seminal collection of black Southern folklore, the anthology Mules and Men.
- Available from the EDSITEment resource Documenting the American South are two useful survey essays that situate Hurston's work in the twin contexts of Southern literature and folklore: "Literature in the American South" and "Folklore in Literature" (for the second webpage, go to "Literature in the American South," and find "folklore" on the left sidebar). Both essays are also lucid and introductory enough to share with students who may not have a formal education in either field.
- For biographical material on Zora Neale Hurston, including a chronology of her collecting and publishing enterprises, see the page of resources on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from the EDSITEment-reviewed Internet Public Library. (Do note, however, that the IPL accepts as authoritative the birth year of 1901, which is the year Hurston, in her later years, would usually claim she was born; most scholars, however, accept 1891 as the more probably authentic date. As with much else about Hurston's life and work, separating the factual from the imaginative can be tricky!)

  Also available from the IPL's resource page on Hurston is a link to an article, originally published in *African American Review*, entitled "The World in a Jug and a Stopper in Her Hand: *Their Eyes* as Blues Performance." The article traces elements of the blues oral tradition in the novel and is an excellent resource for teachers looking either to challenge advanced classes with sophisticated literary criticism or to forge interdisciplinary links with music.

  Also available through the resources of the Internet Public Library are the archives of the New York Times, where you can find a fascinating article discussing Hurston's collecting endeavors: "A Well Untapped: Black Folktales of the Old South." Also available from the archives is a lesson plan, "Legends and Lore: Understanding and Creating Folk Tales in the Language Arts Classroom."
- Teachers looking for a broader literary consideration of *Their Eyes* will find a stimulating roundtable discussion transcribed at Wired for Books: Community Reconsidered, a link on the EDSITEment resource, Center for the Liberal Arts; among other topics, the discussants, who are Ohio University professors, explore the role and nature of community in the novel, a perspective very useful for instructors seeking insights into Hurston's creation and exploration of folk social dynamics in her fiction.

Suggested Activities

This lesson is designed to be used in conjunction with a thorough reading and discussion of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from a more conventional textual viewpoint. It also assumes that students are familiar with the broad outlines of Hurston's biography, which is widely available in biographical reference anthologies and on the Web.

The following lesson steps assume that students have already read (or have gotten at least as far as Chapter Six in) *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

1. Folklore and Traditional Life in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

- Begin by sharing Folklore: Some Useful Terminology with students. While assigning students to read a lengthy term sheet straight through is probably both punitive and counterproductive, teachers should make sure to cover the terms *culture, tradition, narrative, orality and performance* (listed in that order under "The Basics"); the sections on "Folklore and Its Component Terms" and "What Isn't Folklore?" in their entirety; and the genres of *folktale, Märchen, legend*, and *ballad* from the section entitled "A Few Folk Narrative Genres." A good approach with many of these terms, especially *culture, tradition*, and *narrative*, is to have students define them first—on the board, in writing, or in conversation with the teacher and with other students—before showing them the more formal definitions. The likelihood that students' own informal definitions are largely correct is empowering and a good place to start stressing the idea that everyone belongs to multiple folk groups and everyone possesses lore.
- When students have a solid understanding of the meanings of these terms, ask them to work together in small groups to identify their own membership in folk groups. Remind them that, broadly defined, a folk group is any two or more people who share at least one common factor. Students will likely find they belong to a diverse array of folk groups constituted along lines of gender, class, family, age, and interests. Then ask each small group to identify *as specifically as possible* a folk group to which all the members belong (bonus points for wit if they identify the small group to which you just assigned them). Once they've chosen such a group, ask them to list as many of the traditions that unite that folk group as they can, and then have them categorize their shared lore by genre—is it folk speech, folk narrative, folk belief, folk costume, calendar customs, etc.?
- After students have a firm idea of how the basic concepts of folklore studies relate to their own lives, assign them the following task: review as much of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as they've already read, looking for both as many distinct folk groups as they can find and for the traditions that bind those folk groups together. To which genres of folklore do those traditional practices belong? This assignment would work well as homework, allowing students an opportunity to consider parts of the novel they've already read from a different critical perspective. You could also require that students present their findings in a more formal way—a handout of some kind, a multimedia display, or simply an oral presentation. Teachers with large groups of students or limited time may find it most useful to break the novel up into sections, assigning different students or groups of students responsibility for different chapters; alternately, having students consider the same chapters allows them to cross-check each other and compare their findings and interpretations. Do what works best for your schedule, class size, and classroom dynamic.
- Once students have shared their findings, it's time to expose them to Zora Neale Hurston, folklorist and anthropologist. Referring to the biographical resources listed above from Internet Public Library, tell them that Hurston was also a well-traveled, successful, and admired collector of black Southern folklore. Students should read Hurston's "Proposed Recording Expedition in to the Floridas," archived in the *Florida Folklife from the WPA Collections*, from the American Memory Collection. Another resource from the American Memory Collection worth reviewing at this point is "Ethnic and Cultural Groups Recorded by the WPA in Florida."
- Students can then compare Hurston's description of Floridian blacks' folklife to that found in the novel. Is her depiction in the novel anything like the real-world folk traditions she describes? How many of the ethnic and cultural groups listed does Hurston incorporate into her novel, and how thoroughly does she present their traditional life? Using the websites above, along with the first section of the worksheet, Folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, document your findings and the answers to these questions. Teachers—especially those interested in encouraging creative writers—can remind their students that most great writers write what they know, drawing on their experiences and on first-hand research to create more compelling and lively fiction.

2. Folk Song and Folk Narrative: Orality, Performance, and Transcription

- In order to complete this module of the unit, students and teachers will need access to a computer that has audio download and playback capacities. If such equipment is lacking, the teacher might consider substituting another audio or video tape recording of a storyteller performing African-American folktales. Rex Ellis's *The Ups and Downs of Being Brown* (audiobook from August House Publishers) is one such collection that would work with this lesson; although the stories will not mesh as well with *Their Eyes* as will the actual stories Hurston herself collected, they do present a picture of the African American narrative tradition.
- If the proper computer audio technology is available, teachers should direct students to Florida

Folklife from the WPA Collections, available from American Memory. From here, click on "Search" and type in "Hurston" when the option to "Search Descriptive Information" comes up. Twenty-six documents should return, most of them audio files of ballads and other folk songs Hurston collected (and in many cases performs) throughout the rural black communities of Florida. Before having students embark on transcription on their own, the teacher can model a simple transcription exercise, working with the entire class as a group to show how transcription is done. "Let the Deal Go Down" would be a good choice for this exercise, owing to its relative brevity and simplicity.

- Once they feel comfortable with the rudiments of transcribing from oral performance, encourage students to browse through the other tracks if time and resources allow; it is best for them to feel ownership of a particular song and to choose that song for themselves. (Teachers should be aware that these songs make reference to drinking, gambling, and sex; some, such as "Uncle Bud," are particularly ribald. If a class is reading *Their Eyes*, however, then there should be very little content in the songs that isn't also in the novel.) Eventually, working alone or in groups, students should select a song to work with. Teachers can direct more or less capable and confident students to longer or shorter tracks, as transcription is more difficult the longer a track gets.
- Allow students to listen to their chosen track multiple times, at first just paying attention to the words and the music but on successive listenings zeroing in on more performative features—tone, pacing, dynamics, and the like. Teachers should define any of these terms that are unclear, making sure that students are clear on their meanings. Eventually, students should listen while taking notes, either using a word-processing program or a pen and notebook. Students may need to replay bits and pieces of their tracks repeatedly: that's fine, as some portions of the tracks may be more easily intelligible than others. (It may be easiest if students have access to headphones so they don't distract others or get distracted themselves. If feasible, a language lab would be an ideal environment for such an exercise.) If only one or a very few computers are available, the teacher can limit the exercise to group transcription of one song together—the important thing is to get students focused on the relationship between oral performance and written text.
- Next, students will transcribe their choice from among Hurston's songs using the audio recordings on the WPA site above. They should try their best to faithfully recreate its performative dimension on the printed page, just as Hurston does in many of her works. Students have by now doubtless noticed that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is written in *eye dialect* (for a definition of eye dialect, see page 3 of Folklore: Some Useful Terminology); for another definitive example of eye dialect, try Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, from the University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, a link on the EDSITEment-reviewed Center for the Liberal Arts. If students have not already read aloud from *Their Eyes* (or from *Huck*), now is a great time to actually have them read the words not as they would sound translated into so-called standard English, but as the spelling and arrangement of those words literally suggest. Discuss the various tactics authors use to recreate the sounds of various dialects and speech features when writing. Students may have already transcribed their chosen songs into "standard" English, but they should also attempt to transcribe them into appropriate eye dialect—either have them revise a "standard" English transcription or, if time is short, transcribe directly into eye dialect.
- Once students have finished their transcriptions, have them trade transcriptions with other students or transcribing groups, and try to read one another's transcriptions aloud. Which transcriptions are most phonetically accurate? Which are closest to "standard" written English? Where did two students or groups of students make different choices in transcribing the same oral text? Ultimately, students should see that transcription approaches and eye dialect are judgment calls on the part of folklorists and authors, who must balance readability with local color/accuracy. Having a student read the eye dialect transcription of a song she hasn't heard and then playing the song to see how close the two pronunciations and readings is a great way of getting students to think about the relationship between oral and written language and literature.
- Next, share with students some of *Hurston*'s own transcriptions: her seminal collection of black Southern folklore, the anthology Mules and Men, available as an e-text from American Studies at the University of Virginia. *Mules and Men* contains Hurston's transcriptions of some of the folksongs archived at the Florida WPA site, including "Mule on de Mount" and "Let the Deal Go Down," so if students chose either of those songs, a comparison may be illustrative. Remind students that Hurston's patrons and audience were largely composed of white Northern scholars and writers—do they think she watered down (or, conversely, exaggerated) any features of dialect for her audience's sake? If so, did she make the right choice? Are the same factors at work in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? Who, in students' opinions, was the target audience for the novel?

3. Hurston and Storytelling

- Having crafted written transcriptions of texts first encountered in oral form, students may enjoy converting one of Hurston's already-transcribed texts into a live performance. An excellent choice from American Studies is the etiological folktale "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men" which not only contains some excellent examples of pacing, dialect, and tone, but comments on gender relations in a manner very germane to *Their Eyes*. Students may wish to act out the story in groups like a play, or they may want to practice creating different voices, postures, and gestures for each of the characters in the story (God, the Devil, Man, and Woman). In any case, make sure to instruct the audience (i.e., the rest of the class) to pay close attention and be ready to ask the storyteller or actors about the decisions he/they made when performing the story. Which characters, scenes, and lines were most effective from the audience's point of view? How did the performance choices made contribute to the theme or message of the folktale?
- If time permits, the teacher can break the class into groups, assigning each group a folktale, which they are to perform as a group to the rest of the class, and which only the teacher and they have seen in advance. Afterward, have the audience (everyone except the performing group) write, from memory, a transcription of a few lines from the story highlighting the most important performance features they noticed when the group acted out the story. Remind students that Hurston didn't always have a tape recorder when she was collecting, and that she often relied on both her memory and her ear for features of dialect and performance! (Other appropriate folktales for this exercise include "How the Negroes Got Their Freedom," "Why They Always Use Rawhide on a Mule," and "How a Loving Couple Was Parted"; all three texts are available from American Studies).
- Have students pull out their completed worksheets (see exercise 1, above) and then return the discussion to the text of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Which scenes and characters in the novel do students feel are most like those found in the folktales they've looked at? Have them complete (perhaps as homework, or in groups) the second part of the worksheet, labeled "*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Folktale." To what extent do the most folktale-like parts of the novel overlap with those portions that most vividly and accurately reflect folklife and culture as identified by students on the first part of the worksheet? Remind students that good storytelling relates details of plot, character, and setting in both vivid and familiar terms; this principle holds for novelists as well as spinners of oral tales.
- At the very end of the novel, Janie tells Pheoby, "...Talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin' else....It's a known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do for theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves." And yet, some of Janie's most powerful moments in the novel come when she tells stories or uses language in some way—her defense in court of the true circumstances of Tea Cake's death, for instance, or her telling Joe off on his deathbed. Is Janie right? Is talking no substitute for experience? Can talking count as experience? When and when not? These questions are a good way to draw to a close a consideration of the role of orality and storytelling in the novel—not just compositionally, but thematically. In what other novels do characters tell stories in ways that affect others or express the novel's themes?

Extending the Lesson

- As a capstone to the unit, have students craft their own short stories in which they draw on their own folk traditions and folk group affiliations to create believable characters, social relationships, conflicts, and dialogue. Refer them to Chapters Five and Six of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which contain some of Hurston's liveliest evocations of folklife, for use as models. Drawing on the folk groups they identified and explored in exercise 1, and the transcription activities from exercise 2, challenge them to create short stories in which eye dialect, traditional narratives such as jokes or family stories, and other aspects of oral tradition figure prominently. Students may find it helpful to do some "ethnographic spying," interviewing or listening to their friends with tape recorder and/or notebook in hand to record credible and accurate details of folk speech.
- Follow up with a reading aloud of students' stories (it would be wonderful also give hard copies of each story to all the students so they could again compare the authors' oral performances and the printed texts of each story) and with a discussion of how their stories are similar to or different from Hurston's narrative in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How easy or hard was it to portray their own folklife in writing? How well do they think they did? How important is it to get these details right? Where else in their reading have they seen authors incorporate aspects of traditional life into their fiction?

- Another way to extend the lesson, as suggested above, is simply to bring students' attention as much as possible to the presence of folklore in other works of literature. For example, in an American literature survey course, students might enjoy exploring the role of folklore in the following canonical novels: Puritan folk beliefs concerning witches and the devil in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*; slang and customs present in the party scenes of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (even the rich possess folklore, remember!); and tracing the many, many depictions of superstition, folk magic, and folk speech in Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
- Another possible approach is to delve more deeply into Hurston's work, investigating the way she weaves folk tradition and literary creativity together not just in *Mules and Men*, but in *Jonah's Gourd Vine, Moses, Man of the Mountain*, and *Dust Tracks on a Road*. What sorts of parallels exist between those works' utilization of folklore and the folklife that forms the heart of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?

Selected EDSITEment Websites

- American Memory Collection [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ammemhome.html]
  - Florida Folklife from the WPA Collections [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/flwpahtml/flwpahome.html]
- American Studies at the University of Virginia [http://xroads.virginia.edu/]
  - Electronic text of *Mules and Men* [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Grand-Jean/Hurston/Chapters/siteintroduction.html]
- Documenting the American South [http://docsouth.unc.edu/index.html]
  - "Literature in the American South" [http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/esc.html]
  - "Folklore in Literature" (same site as above; click on left sidebar) [http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/esc.html]
- Internet Public Library [http://www.ipl.org]
  - Their Eyes Were Watching God literary criticism links [http://www.ipl.org/cgi-bin/ref/litcrit/litcrit.out.pl?ti=the-69]
  - Zora Neale Hurston literary criticism links [http://www.ipl.org/cgi-bin/ref/litcrit/litcrit.out.pl?au=hur-71]
  - "Legends and Lore: Understanding and Creating Folk Tales in the Language Arts Classroom" [http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/lessons/19990522friday.html]
  - "A Well Untapped: Black Folktales of the Old South" [http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/19990522friday.html]
  - "Legends and Lore: Understanding and Creating Folk Tales in the Language Arts Classroom" [http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/lessons/19990522friday.html]
- Center for the Liberal Arts [http://www.virginia.edu/cla/]
  - "Wired for Books: Community Reconsidered" Zora Neale Hurston discussion transcripts [http://www.tcom.ohiou.edu/books/zora.htm]
  - The University of Virginia's Electronic Text Center e-text of Huck Finn [http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/huckfinn/huchompg.html]

Other Information

Standards Alignment

1. NCSS-1

   Culture and cultural diversity. more

2. NCSS-3

   People, places, and environments. more

3. NCTE/IRA-12

   Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). more

4. NCTE/IRA-3

   Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. more

5. NCTE/IRA-4

   Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. more

6. NCTE/IRA-5

   Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes. more

7. NCTE/IRA-6

   Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. more

8. NCTE/IRA-8

   Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. more

9. NCTE/IRA-9

   Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

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Folklore: Some Useful Terminology

The following definitions may also prove useful to teachers interested in applying concepts and genre categories from folklore studies to literature. While not all are explicitly relevant to this lesson, many will prove useful. Cross-referenced terms are in boldface.

The Basics:

CULTURE: Everything that human beings (and possibly some other species) do that isn't motivated solely by natural instinct. Sleeping is natural, not cultural, but sleeping using a pillow is cultural. Eating acorns to stave off starvation is natural; eating acorn bread is cultural. Laughing is natural; laughing at a knock-knock joke is cultural. Culture includes tool-making and -using, creative and artistic expression, language development and use, and formulation of beliefs and values. Culture is also a word used to describe groups of individuals who share common cultural traits but who differ in some way(s) from members of other such groups.

TRADITION: Meaningful **cultural** behavior (or **lore**) that exhibits continuity in time—often over several generations—and continuity in space (or among the **folk**, because by "space" we mean the people within a **folk group**). The adjective traditional is sometimes used synonymously with the adjective **folk**. For example, we can call "Sleeping Beauty" a **traditional narrative** or a **folk narrative** and mean pretty much the same thing.

NARRATIVE: A story of any kind, almost always involving both plot (a sequence of causally and/or logically linked events) and characters (who both enact and react to the plot). Stories usually involve conflict, rising action, a climax, and a resolution of some kind. Different **cultures** have a differing "sense of story" telling them what is and isn't appropriately narrative.

ORALITY: A quality of anything that is spoken, chanted, recited, sung, or read aloud rather than written down or read quietly. Most **folk** or **traditional narrative** is oral in nature, or was once upon a time. See **literature**, below, for a consideration of the differences between oral and written **literature**.

PERFORMANCE: An essential artistic dimension of anything **oral**, performance refers either to an individual rendition of a **traditional narrative** (or song, or dance, or **drama**), which may well also constitute a unique **variant** of the work being performed. Performance also refers more broadly to all those aesthetic features of such a rendition that cannot be fixed in print. These performative features include tone of voice, dynamics, pacing, interaction with an audience, kinesthetic gestures, and costume. For instance, a folklorist might analyze the *performative* dimensions of a *performance* of

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"Little Red Riding Hood," taking note of the storyteller's adoption of distinct voices and gestures for the different characters, noting the young audience's gasps of fear at the appropriate moments, and the total length of the telling compared to other performances of the same **narrative**.

VARIANT: Any version of a **folk/traditional narrative** that bears a striking resemblance to another version of the same **narrative**. Variants may result from monogenesis (multiple tellers imitating and/or modifying one initial, original version of a story) or from polygenesis (different tellers independently arriving at the same basic tale type).

ETIOLOGY: Any explanation (**narrative** or not) for the origin of something.

Folklore and its Component Terms:

FOLKLORE: First coined in 1846 by William John Thoms, a British antiquarian. Folklore can be divided into its two component words, folk and lore. Folklore is thus all the **lore** shared by a particular **folk**.

THE FOLK, a.k.a. A FOLK GROUP: Any two or more people who share at least one significant **cultural** thing in common. The things that a folk group shares in common are often **traditions**, which help to create a shared identity for the group and its members and which also help the group endure over time. Everyone belongs to at least a few folk groups; most people belong to many. Some folk groups are very broad and diverse (all Americans, or even all students at the same school), while some are very exclusive and specific (two best friends). The more **cultural** factors a folk group shares, the more **traditions** they are likely to share as well: while we can generalize to a certain extent about Irish Catholics, Irish Catholics who live in the same town, work the same fields, and worship at the same church are far more likely to share **lore** than, say, a Catholic business executive living in Dublin and a Catholic peat farmer in a small rural village.

THE LORE, a.k.a. TRADITIONAL CULTURE: Lore is **traditional** behavior or material shared by members of a **folk group**. Lore includes but is not limited to all of the following:

Traditional narratives (epics, magic tales, legends, jokes, folk drama)
Traditional costumes (professional clothing, sports uniforms, hairstyles)
Traditional beliefs (religions, superstitions, ethical values)
Traditional non-narrative speech (slang, jargon, nicknames)
Traditional material culture (architecture, folk art of all kinds)
Traditional calendar customs (holidays, festivals, birthday parties)
Traditional music and dance (folksongs, folk dances)

The most important thing to remember is that lore is **traditional**—it has continuity over time and through space. If a hairstyle is in **fashion** for only a short while, it isn't

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traditional. **Tradition** lasts and has meaning for a particular group of people over the long haul.

What Isn't Folklore?

Here are some things that are generally *not* considered to be folklore by folklorists:

FASHIONS and FADS: Cultural objects or practices that are distinct from **tradition** because of their impermanence. **Traditions**, while not eternal, last longer than fashions, which tend to vanish relatively quickly and have only temporary meaning for those who adopt them.

MASS-PRODUCED MATERIALS: These are only **traditional** if they acquire some special meaning to a **folk group** or are used in other **traditional** ways or contexts. A glass pitcher that was manufactured along with thousands of other identical pitchers in a glassworks factory isn't **traditional** unless over time it becomes important to a **folk group**. For example, if a group of siblings develop a **tradition** of using that "lucky pitcher" every summer for their annual lemonade sale because it "magically" increases sales, then the pitcher could be considered **traditional**.

FAKELORE: Folklorist Richard Dorson's term for material that looks like **folklore** but is really invented by persons or groups who want the allure of **tradition** without having to wait. As an example, Paul Bunyan was invented by the advertising department of a logging company. Ironically, over time fakelore can indeed become **folklore**, and Paul Bunyan is again a good example. He wasn't **folklore** back in the early twentieth century, but he certainly is now!

LITERATURE: Unless prefaced with the word "**oral**," literature is understood to be the *written* artistic output of a single individual or small group of individuals, created during a relatively fixed time period and ultimately existing as a "finished," stable or authoritative text. Written literature is often based on **oral** literature, though: Shakespeare borrowed many of his plots from **folk narrative**, and many **epics** that survive in written form were originally performed orally (the *Odyssey*, for instance). Also, writers of literature often use **eye dialect** to simulate traditional patterns of folk speech in their creations. As with **mass-produced materials** above, written literature can acquire **traditional** status if a **folk group** imbues it with special significance, such as when the members of a sorority read the same Emily Dickinson poem every time they induct a new sister.

EYE DIALECT: A technique used by both folklorists and fiction writers to simulate speech as it is actually spoken rather than in its most polished, abstract, "correct" form. Eye dialect seeks to recreate the pronunciation, pacing, and syntax of oral language by deliberately altering "proper" spelling, sentence structure, and rules of grammar. When Janie from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* says, "Dis sittin' in de rulin' chair is been hard on Jody," the seeming mistakes of spelling and subject-verb

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agreement are not mistakes at all. Rather, they are Hurston's attempt to bring across orality in writing.

A Few Genres of Folk Narrative:

EPIC: A long narrative poem, usually of **oral** origin, that recounts the larger-than-life deeds of a great hero, who is often of divine descent. An epic hero embodies the values of a particular society and struggles against terrific odds or adversaries. Epic poetry often employs elevated diction and a host of sophisticated stylistic devices. *Beowulf* is an **oral** epic, as are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost* are **literary**, not **oral** or **traditional** epics.

FOLKTALE: A **traditional** prose **narrative**.

MÄRCHEN (MARE-shen) or MAGIC TALE: A **folktale** dealing chiefly with elements of magic, wonder, or the supernatural. Such stories vary widely in length, tone, and message (if any), but often describe a young person's rise to wealth or prominence through cleverness, virtue, and/or the intervention of magical helpers. Also often called fairy tales, though not all feature fairies. "Cinderella" is a well-known Märchen and exists in many **variant** forms across different cultures, such as the Russian "Vasilisa the Bold."

LEGEND: A **folktale** that is told as though the teller believes it to be true. Legends often deal with the origins of things, phenomena, or names (**etiological** legends) or with the actions of real people, past or present (historical legends).

URBAN LEGEND: A **legend** told in and/or about modern industrialized society. Urban legends often express the concerns and anxieties of contemporary existence. The "Kentucky Fried Rat," which suggests that a local fast-food outlet is serving less-than-sanitary food, is a well-known urban legend and has several **variants** that change the location of the restaurant and the deep-fried creature in question.

JOKE: A **traditional narrative**, usually short, designed primarily to elicit a humorous reaction. In the English-language joking **tradition**, jokes usually end with a punchline and contain three episodes, the last of which is the punchline itself. The "Farmer's Daughter" joke cycle, in which a traveling salesman's car breaks down near a farmhouse, where he is warned not to become intimate with the farmer's young daughter, contains dozens of **variant** versions of the same joke.

FOLK DRAMA: Traditional drama, often with music or dance and usually performed with less formality than mainstream theatre. Folk drama often involves audience participation and/or improvisation. The Christmas mumming plays popular across Europe for many centuries are folk dramas, as is the live "floor show" in front of the screen at many showings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

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BALLAD: Most broadly, any **traditional** song that recounts a **narrative**, typically focusing on a single episode. Ballads are usually structured around repetition, most often with an alternating pattern of verses and a repeated refrain.

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Folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Part One: Cultural Groups and Folklore

Use the following chart to compare the findings of folklorists working in South Florida during the 1930's to Zora Neale Hurston's incorporation of ethnic/cultural groups and their folklife into her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Florida cultural or ethnic group	Defining features of group (religion, language, etc.)	Types of lore documented for this group on Florida Folklife Website	Types of lore displayed by members of this group in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Part Two: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Folktale
Having studied some of the folktales Hurston collected, you can now answer the following question: Which elements of *Their Eyes* most reflect the influence of the African-American folktales ZNH recorded?

Element of the novel (character, scene, piece of dialogue, etc.)	Chapter and page #s where found in the text of the novel	Features of orality or performance displayed by this element	Moral features or social commentary displayed by this element	Overlap, if any, with Florida Folklife Project lore collected (from Part One, above)

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